

Netflix's Movie Blitz Takes Aim at Hollywood's Heart

By Brooks Barnes

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As hundreds of movie buffs waited in line to see Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma" at the Telluride Film Festival in August, an S.U.V. rolled up and a tall, tanned man wearing sunglasses stepped out. He smiled and waved before breezing into the theater with his entourage.

"Was that some sort of celebrity?" one ticket holder asked.

Moviegoers may not know Scott Stuber, but he is fast becoming one of the most important — and disruptive — people in the film business. A former Universal Pictures vice chairman, Mr. Stuber, 50, is Netflix's movie chief. His mandate is to make the streaming service's original film lineup as formidable as its television operation, which received 112 Emmy nominations this year, the most of any network.

With the rapturously reviewed "Roma," which arrived on Netflix on Friday, Mr. Stuber has pushed the internet giant into the center of the Oscar race. Mr. Cuarón's subtle film about life in 1970s Mexico City is likely to give Netflix its first best-picture nomination. To make sure, the company is backing "Roma" with perhaps the most extravagant Academy Awards campaign ever mounted.

But "Roma" is just the start of Mr. Stuber's cinematic onslaught, one that is forcing old-line studios and multiplex chains to confront a panic-inducing question: Will the streaming company that prompted many people to cut the cable cord now cause people to stop going to theaters? Having disrupted the television and music businesses, the internet is finally threatening the heart of Hollywood.

Mr. Stuber, armed with Netflix's debt-financed war chest, has films coming from Martin Scorsese, Steven Soderbergh, Dee Rees, Guillermo del Toro, Noah Baumbach and the king of spectacle, Michael Bay. "If you're going to build a great film studio, you have to build it with great filmmakers," Mr. Stuber said, noting that Hollywood royals — Meryl Streep, Ben Affleck, Eddie Murphy, Sandra Bullock, Dwayne Johnson — had also signed on for Netflix movies.

Mr. Stuber's operation is set up to supply 55 original films a year, including some with budgets as high as \$200 million. Add in documentaries and animated movies, handled by other divisions, and the number of annual Netflix film releases climbs to about 90. To compare, Universal, one of Hollywood's most prolific traditional studios, releases roughly 30 movies a year.

Until now, moviedom has been relatively protected from the digital forces that have reshaped the rest of media. Most films still arrive in the same way they have for decades: first in theaters, for an exclusive run of about 90 days, and then in homes. Multiplex chains, including AMC and Regal, have fought off efforts to shorten that period. They worry that people will be reluctant to buy tickets if they can see the same film in their living rooms just a few weeks (or days) later.

"Given the marginal profitability of the theatrical business, if you lose 10 percent of the audience — some people stay home — some cinemas go out of business," said John Fithian, president of the National Association of Theater Owners, a group whose members believe big screens are part of the very definition of film.

Netflix mostly bypasses theaters. To qualify for awards, a handful of Netflix movies appear simultaneously online and in art theaters in New York and Los Angeles. Pressed by Mr. Stuber, Netflix unveiled a third release model in October, making "Roma" and two other prestige movies available in cinemas first — but only for one to three weeks — and on its service second. Most theaters have refused to comply, although Netflix has cobbled together about 140 theaters in North America for "Roma" and nearly 600 more overseas. (The other two films are "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs," directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, which only played in 21 domestic theaters last month; and "Bird Box," a thriller starring Ms. Bullock, that arrived in four theaters on Thursday.)

Netflix's newfound attention to theaters is an olive branch to Oscar voters. Heavyweights like Steven Spielberg have chafed at Netflix's policy of streaming films immediately, suggesting that all of the service's content should be considered television. But Netflix needs the Oscars and the validation they bring to compete with traditional studios for top talent.

"We're trying to build a new studio that is exciting for artists," Mr. Stuber said. "As we do that, it's important to be open to criticism. When a great artist says, 'Hey, this doesn't work,' then we'd better try to fix it. For some of our filmmakers, that means having a theatrical release and contending for awards."

Don't expect Netflix to bend much further, however.

"In a world where consumer choice is driving everything — how we shop, how we order groceries, how we are entertained — we're trying to get to a place where consumers have theatrical viewing as a choice," Mr. Stuber said. "But we also think it is critical that, if you don't have the means or the access or the time to go to a theater, you are still able to see movies without a long wait."



Mr. Stuber's operation is set to supply 55 original films a year, including some with \$200 million budgets. Philip Cheung for The New York Times

Mr. Fithian of the theater owners association called Mr. Stuber's comment about access "absolute hogwash." He added, "For filmmakers who want to go to Netflix, they are kind of selling their soul — the pot of money versus how they know a movie should be seen."

Mr. Scorsese disagrees. Netflix adopted his coming mob drama "The Irishman," starring Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and Joe Pesci, after Paramount balked at its cost.

"Some might say, 'It's Netflix, it's not about theatrical, it's all about streaming,'" Mr. Scorsese said in an email. "To a certain extent that's true, of course, and, for me, coming from the theatrical era, it feels odd and uncertain — Joel and Ethan and Alfonso Cuarón and Tamara Jenkins would probably say the same. But we're all making the films *as big-screen experiences*, and they're giving us theatrical windows. And, most importantly of all, Scott and his team are actually *making our movies*, from a place of respect and love for cinema, and that means everything."

"Roma" was financed and produced by Participant Media, which approached six companies, including traditional ones like Fox Searchlight, as potential distributors. All of them, with the exception of Netflix, Mr. Cuarón said, were concerned about the commercial viability of a black-and-white, subtitled film. "I'm excited about this Netflix distribution model developing," Mr. Cuarón said. "It will bring back diversity to cinema."

He added: "I trust Scott. I've known him for a long, long, long time."

Mr. Stuber, who has a mellow, genial style that stands out in monomaniacal Hollywood, is the consummate film industry insider. He got to know Mr. Cuarón in the early 2000s, when Mr. Stuber was a senior executive at Universal and Mr. Cuarón was making "Children of Men" at the studio.

In an interview, Mr. Stuber casually spoke about projects with "Sandy" and "Marty" between sips of golden oolong tea. (That would be Ms. Bullock and Mr. Scorsese.)

Mr. Stuber left his job at Universal in 2005 to become a producer, specializing in bro-culture comedies like "Ted" and "You, Me and Dupree." Despite a mixed record — his misfires included "A Million Ways to Die in the West" and "Battleship" — he was courted to run Paramount in 2017. Netflix reached out around the same time.

At Netflix, Mr. Stuber has had to bridge the cultural gap between Hollywood, where decisions are made by gut instinct, and his own company, where data and algorithms rule. “It can’t be easy, but Scott seems to be everywhere at once,” said Susanne Bier, who directed “Bird Box.” “I’ll send him a text and there will be a quick text back.”

The Netflix film department has two major groups. One is called Originals, intended to supply about 20 movies a year with budgets of \$20 million to \$200 million. The Indie group is set up for about 35 films a year, with budgets of up to \$20 million; about 75 percent of its output will be genre movies aimed at specific audiences (like the romantic comedy “Kissing Booth,” a summer hit), with the balance dedicated to art-house directors like Nicole Holofcener.

Mr. Stuber has greenlight authority for all Netflix films but delegates some of those decisions.

Mr. Stuber, who is married to Molly Sims, the actress and lifestyle entrepreneur, grew up in Granada Hills, Calif., where his father worked for Lockheed Martin and his mother at an import-export company. He knew no one in Hollywood.

After graduating from the University of Arizona with a film degree (he went there to play baseball), Mr. Stuber got a job at Universal in 1992 as a publicity assistant. His duties included delivering news clippings at 8 a.m. daily to the studio’s all-powerful chief, Lew Wasserman.

After about six months, Mr. Wasserman, apparently impressed by Mr. Stuber’s punctuality, spoke to him for the first time. “He said, ‘Hey kid, what do you want to be when you grow up?’” Mr. Stuber recalled.

The young Mr. Stuber’s quick reply? “You.”

Cited in US v Paramount
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